

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 12 | Issue 2

Article 7

4-1-1995

Should Christian Theologians Become Christian Philosophers? A Reply to William Hasker

James A. Keller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Keller, James A. (1995) "Should Christian Theologians Become Christian Philosophers? A Reply to William Hasker," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 7. Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol12/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

SHOULD CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIAN BECOME CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS? A REPLY TO WILLIAM HASKER

James A. Keller

This paper continues a debate about the relation between Christian philosophers and theologians begun by Gordon Kaufman, who argued that Christian theologians need not be interested in "evidentialism." In particular it replies to a paper by William Hasker charging that an earlier defense of Kaufman's position introduced tensions because it required judgments about the merits of "evidentialism" which could be defended only by using the evidentialist arguments whose importance Kaufman denied. This reply denies that there are the tensions Hasker claims and argues that the judgments need not rest on a detailed assessment of evidentialist arguments.

The pages of this journal have seen a series of articles on the relationship between Christian philosophers and theologians. The series began with an article by Gordon Kaufman explaining why (some) Christian theologians are not interested in what he called "evidentialism."¹ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann collaborated on a reply.² I responded to their article as a whole and Paul J. Griffiths responded to one point in it.³ William Hasker has answered my reply.⁴ This note is a reply to Hasker.⁵

The question between Kaufman (and me), on the one hand, and Stump and Kretzmann (and Hasker), on the other, is whether Christian theologians should be interested in certain issues, which Kaufman characterizes as part of evidentialism. (In light of the fact that he was writing for philosophers, I think that this was not the best term he might have chosen, as I shall explain later.) And as Hasker notes, in my reply I did not claim simply that Kaufman was not interested in such issues. Rather, I claimed that it is rational for him not to be interested in these issues, or more modestly, that it was not irrational for him not to be interested in them.⁶ Hasker concedes that I met some of Stump and Kretzmann's criticisms, but he claims that my defense (including my suggested interpretations and modifications of Kaufman) "reveals and/or introduces some deep tensions in the position" (p. 273). He goes on to discuss three tensions in Kaufman's position as modified by me, which I shall term the "KK view."⁷

I think the central feature in all the alleged tensions is this: the KK view which I created in defending Kaufman involves assertions about the justified-



ness of beliefs (or assertions) about God, but this justifiedness cannot be assessed apart from precisely those evidentialist considerations in which Kaufman has expressed no interest. This is an important challenge to the KK view; to answer it, I will have to develop the view further.

In my earlier response I assumed, without explicitly saying so, a kind of soft perspectivalism. It is a perspectivalism in that I believe that each thinker sees the world from within a set of assumptions, categories, beliefs, etc. A thinker evaluates evidence, decides what constitutes a good reason, *decides what issues are worth investigating*, etc. from within his or her own perspective. My view is a *soft* perspectivalism in that I think that these categories, assumptions, etc. can be rationally adjudicated. However, I further think that rational adjudication of basic aspects of a person's perspective is very difficult. (I suspect that Kaufman is a perspectivalist, though I do not know whether he is a soft or a hard perspectivalist [a person who believes that rational adjudication of perspectives is impossible].)⁸ As a soft perspectivalist, I believe that when all truths are known, it will be known which is the correct perspective, but those of us alive now will probably not live that long.

In the meantime, what shall we do? Is a thinker irrational if she does not want to spend any (more) time considering whether another perspective is the correct one or considering issues which are important only from within a different perspective? I do not think so. Each of us has only so much time, and we devote it to activities which seem most promising and most worthwhile. But they seem that way to each of us from his own perspective. That perspective is rationally adjudicable, but we may have better things to do than adjudicate the perspective; for example, we may want to refine the perspective (as Stump and Kretzmann, e.g., have so ably done on some issues in Thomistic theism).

So I would say that it is not irrational for Kaufman, given his perspective, to investigate what he does and to ignore what Stump, Kretzmann, and like-minded Christian philosophers do. I would also say that it is not irrational for them to do what they do and to ignore Kaufman. Note that Stump and Kretzmann do not explain why they do not investigate the issues which concern Kaufman (e.g., the involvement of Christians in great evils). It might also be rational for either party to explore the perspective of the other and to try to adjudicate the issues between them, but it is not irrational for them not to do so. After all, they have only so much time and energy. That is why *from Kaufman's perspective* (but presumably not from Stump's) there are questions which demand a rather different approach.⁹

The foregoing puts in broader perspective my defense of the rationality of Kaufman's not investigating in detail the arguments of the evidentialists. But does that defense commit the KK view to claims about the value of evidentialist arguments which could be defended only by the sort of detailed analysis

of those arguments which the KK view implies that Christian theologians may properly omit? That it does make such a commitment is the nub of Hasker's charge, as we can see by looking at the three points he makes.

1. According to Hasker, the KK view is committed to saying both that evidentialism is unimportant and uninteresting and that traditional Christian beliefs are lacking in support. The first part of this point, though perhaps stated too strongly, is at least roughly the point we were both making.¹⁰ As for the second half of the point, both Kaufman and I did say things which might be taken to support it; for example, as Hasker notes, I distinguished "matters on which we are more justified in being confident from those on which we are less justified" (my p. 73). However, whether it does support Hasker's point depends on the basis on which the distinction is made. I think Hasker assumes that it could be made only on the basis of a careful analysis of the arguments. But Kaufman could make it on the basis of the degree of consensus achieved among those who have studied the arguments. It is beyond dispute that there is as yet no consensus among all (or even almost all) interested parties about which arguments establish knowledge-claims about God. This situation provides a basis for the KK view to hold that claims about God are matters on which we are not justified in being very confident. Of course, the KK view may be wrong about this: there may be unnoticed or unappreciated arguments which establish to a very high degree the truth of certain knowledge-claims about God. But surely it is not irrational to think this is unlikely. Nor is it irrational for Kaufman to think that in light of this fact about the status of arguments about God, as a Christian theologian he has better uses for his time than to investigate these arguments.

Of course, it is fully compatible with this position to admit that from a different perspective some knowledge-claims about God seem better justified than do others. It is also compatible to admit that some people might be justified, at least from their perspective, in devoting their attention to arguments about these knowledge-claims. The KK view is not committed to claiming that no one should investigate these arguments; it is committed only to claiming that those who do accept its perspective are not irrational in devoting their attention to other matters.

Does this mean Kaufman and I reject all evidence? I do not. And if Kaufman proposes this, I cannot agree with him. But I do not think that one should conclude from his rejection of evidentialism that he rejects evidence, for I do not think he is using "evidentialism" in a very precise way. I think he uses it as a term for a position which has a concern for the kinds of issues, and uses the philosophical methodology, typical of people like Plantinga, Alston, Stump, Kretzmann, etc. (Thus I think that Kaufman would call Plantinga an evidentialist in the loose sense in which [I think] he uses that term.) But I also think that Kaufman makes arguments, appeals to evidence, gives reasons,

etc. However, they are different kinds of reasons and evidence, and they involve different sorts of issues, from those which concern Stump, Kretzmann, etc. So Kaufman would not regard what he does as exemplifying evidentialism.¹¹ As Hasker notes (p. 274), Kaufman is not interested in epistemological discussions. But he does give evidence for some claims. And his can be a consistent position if one admits that it is rational for people not to explore issues which do not seem worthwhile from their perspective. (Of course, Kaufman has to be concerned about what constitutes a good reason, but he can explore that topic in relation to issues which concern him; he does not have to explore it in relation to issues which concern relatively orthodox Christian philosophers.)

2. According to Hasker, the KK view says that "our ways of conceiving God and Christ are heavily determined by culturally-conditioned traditions, concepts, and worldviews," but we are free to modify or reject the traditions we have received. Despite what Hasker says, these two claims are not inconsistent or even in tension. The KK view is that we are strongly influenced by our traditions, not that we are completely determined by them. However, it is very difficult to modify a tradition by which one lives; it typically takes considerable thought and experience to come to the point where a different tradition makes more sense of one's life than an earlier one by which one lived.

Moreover, (what I take to be) the fact that our claims are all culturally conditioned need not imply that those who believe them have no good reason to do so and hold them only because they were taught them as they grew up. It would imply this only if there were no reasons offered for those beliefs within that perspective. But typically this is not so. (Most of us first came to believe certain geometrical truths because we were taught them, yet we may think that we were also taught quite good reasons for holding them. And debates within the philosophy of religion are usually marked by careful and sophisticated argument for the key claims.) But whether some person who holds some belief as part of perspective A has better reasons to hold it than does another person who holds a contradictory belief as part of perspective B is usually a very difficult question. On fundamental matters it cannot be answered without deciding which perspective is more nearly correct. As a soft perspectivist, I believe that in principle this can be done. But I also admit that in practice often it cannot be done: despite prolonged good-faith efforts on both sides no agreement is reached. Someone who is aware of this practical difficulty may well think that it is more worthwhile for her to explore and refine her own perspective rather than to explore some other perspective or to try to determine which is the correct perspective. Simply because she chooses not to explore some other perspective, she need not be irrational nor lacking in reasons which support her beliefs.¹²

3. The third tension Hasker finds in the KK view is that it accepts the claim that “we know in reality almost nothing about God and Christ, but we can be confident in our experiential knowledge of sin and salvation” (p. 275). One part of Hasker’s criticism here may be right. I tried to justify a difference in confidence levels by saying that the charge that something is a sin can be based on our experience of a rupture of our relationship to God while our concepts of God and Christ are not so experientially based. Hasker replied that some of the things Kaufman says are sins go beyond this: e.g., Kaufman’s statement that the attempt to control God by claiming to have conclusive evidences or arguments about God is sin. I agree that this statement does appear to go beyond what is experientially based. But it may be simply a strong way of saying that doing this often leads to evil actions toward those who do not accept the beliefs about God which the evidences or arguments allegedly support—i.e., that it is a sin because it predisposes to evil actions. However, I agree that evil actions are not the inevitable consequence of thinking one has conclusive evidences or arguments about God.¹³

Hasker continues his development of the third tension by claiming that the KK view requires the assumption “that there is some generic experience of a ‘God-relationship’ or ‘salvation’ which is substantially identical across all religions, though it gets described differently depending on the various conceptual systems espoused by different faiths” (p. 275). Hasker’s point here seems correct at least to this extent: the KK view does imply that people who have different perspectives can use a word like *salvation* without being guilty of sheer equivocation.¹⁴ I think people can do this. I think the various uses have in common some sort of feeling of “rightness” or “wholeness” in one’s existence—i.e., they have an experiential component if not a nonexperiential component at least partly in common.¹⁵ (The quoted terms are, of course, also vague, and one can ask whether there is one generic concept for them.) But what one understands to be “wrong” which the rightness replaces differs from religion to religion, and it differs (though typically to a lesser degree) within each religion. And the concrete experiences are not identical; for one thing, a different understanding makes the total experience different, for the understanding affects the experience. Despite these factors, I still think there can be some overlap in meaning for the term “salvation” as it occurs in different perspectives.

Christians understand the salvation they experience to be something involving their relation to a reality they name “God.” If “salvation” is understood to involve this relation, then when Kaufman experiences salvation (i.e., roughly rightness or wholeness in his life), he will speak of being rightly related to God, though he may not be very confident about what this God is like to whom he is related, for he may not think the experience (or anything else) enables him to learn much about God. Or his diffidence in claiming to

know much about God or Christ might be the result of his awareness of the differences among those who call themselves Christian. He might be reasoning something like this: "If so many different people can so differently conceptualize this reality, and if it makes sense from the perspective of each to conceptualize the reality as he or she does, then I should not be very confident about my way of conceptualizing that reality even though it does (or may) make good sense from my perspective."¹⁶

Certainly Hasker is right that conceptions of how our relationship with God may be restored and the experiences of that restoration differ greatly between (theistic) religions and (I would add) between different sects of the same religion. (And some religions have a conception of salvation which does not involve any relation to a god.) I also agree with (what I take to be) his implicit conclusion that not all these conceptions can be correct. However, I would hold that even if someone has a conception of salvation which is largely incorrect, the person might nevertheless live a life which involves a generally increasing experience of rightness or wholeness. That is, I hold that a partially incorrect conception of what salvation involves need not preclude a genuinely saving experience, particularly if we understand (as I do) salvation not as an either-or condition but as admitting of degrees.¹⁷ A partially incorrect conception may mediate a transformation which is experienced as genuinely healing. Later one may (or may not) come to regard that experience as itself only partial or initiatory, but I do not see how any human *can be certain* of having an experience of rightness and wholeness so complete that no improvement is possible; therefore, no one can be certain on the basis of his experience that the salvation he experiences is not just partial or initiatory. However, if one is living a life which is satisfactory on this dimension and it has a certain perspective on God etc. as part of it, then it is not irrational for one not to enter into discussions with others who function out of a somewhat (or very) different perspective.

This is not to say that the truth about whose conception of salvation contains the most nearly correct account of what is wrong with human life and how it can be remedied is uninteresting, but only that other matters may be more interesting and more important. If a Christian theologian finds (within his perspective, for where else can he operate?) that it is more important to focus on how people live as Christians rather than to join certain philosophers in analyzing the nature of salvation implicit in Anselm's account of the atonement, is he necessarily irrational to do so? It may be replied that analyzing these matters or puzzling out the nature of God contributes to living Christian lives or to worshipping God more fervently. Perhaps for many people it does, but would it have that result for everyone? More to the point, would giving attention to such issues always (or even usually) contribute more to the living of Christian lives than would investigating the issues which

concern Kaufman? It may contribute, but so may other activities and concerns. Of course, theologians may not help much either. But if what Christian philosophers do is not demonstrably more effective for everyone than alternative activities would be, then it is not irrational for theologians, who are qua theologians concerned about promoting Christian living, not to enter into the discussions of Christian philosophers.

One final note: I mean this reply to be irenic though I defended the KK view. My basic point is simply that it is not irrational for Kaufman to pursue the issues he pursues rather than those which Christian philosophers pursue. In defending the KK view against Hasker, I assumed that Kaufman might base judgments about the value of (what he calls) evidentialist arguments on their failure to generate a consensus among those who studied them rather than on a detailed assessment of the arguments. But neither in my original paper nor in this one did I intend to suggest or imply that Stump and Kretzmann are irrational in pursuing the issues which they pursue.¹⁸ In both cases, that the scholars are not irrational is dependent on other beliefs which they hold, beliefs which may be false. But there are many other beliefs each holds which may be false and many other theories each holds which merit further elucidation. In each case the failure to investigate the truth of a select set of the scholar's beliefs cannot *ipso facto* be evidence of irrationality. Because of important differences in their beliefs, I think it likely that they will continue to find very different issues worth investigating.¹⁹

Wofford College

NOTES

1. "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6:1 (January 1989), pp. 35-46.

2. "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy," *Faith and Philosophy*, 7:3 (July 1990), pp. 329-39.

3. James A. Keller, "On the Issues Dividing Contemporary Christian Philosophers and Theologians," *Faith and Philosophy* 10:1 (January 1993), pp. 68-78; Paul J. Griffiths, "Stump, Kretzmann, and Historical Blindness," *Faith and Philosophy*, 10:1 (January 1993), pp. 79-85.

4. "Can Philosophy Defend Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 11:2 (April 1994), pp. 272-78.

5. Hasker notes that in my defense of Kaufman I modified his position in certain ways so that what I am defending may not be exactly his position and may not be my own either. Though this comment aptly describes the view I am defending, nevertheless I think it is worth a further note, for I think the view is one which many contemporary Christian theologians would more or less accept.

6. Hasker overstates my aim when he says (p. 273 that I was trying to show that the preferences of the theologian were more rational than those of the Christian philosopher. I was not making any sort of comparison.

7. In this reply I will try to show that Hasker has not identified any serious tensions in the KK view. However, even if I should fail, that would indicate only that the KK view should be modified or abandoned; it would not by itself indicate that Kaufman should be interested in Stump and Kretzmann's methods and issues.

8. Kaufman does not present his position as simply his perspective, but few thinkers do in their initial presentations. They present (what they take to be) the truth. When they are criticized and discover that their opponents do not accept certain important premises, they can either try to defend those premises or simply explain that this is their perspective. In defending Kaufman I took the latter approach since I think that he would not want to debate all the issues needed to resolve the controversy (and I am not sure that Stump and Kretzmann would either; I would not want to).

9. Hasker cites a statement of Kaufman's to this effect in his note 5.

10. I say it is perhaps too strong, for Kaufman argued that there were other issues which were more interesting and more important to Christian theologians. And I attempted to defend that judgment. But to say that X is more interesting or important than Y is not to say or to imply that Y is uninteresting or unimportant.

11. My reason for this analysis of what Kaufman means by *evidentialism* is that it is the only way I can consistently combine what he says about evidentialism and what he does.

12. In his note 7 Hasker acknowledges that the pluralism of traditions generates so great a variety of ways of conceiving God that we may be unable to choose among them. He correctly points out that Christian philosophers have given considerable effort to considering and evaluating different conceptions of God. However, Kaufman might reply that these efforts have not yet yielded anything like a consensus and that he prefers to consider other issues rather than joining in a debate which seems to him unlikely to yield any result which is generally agreed to be correct. Moreover, he may think that other topics of study would yield results which contribute more to the living of a Christian life. (I claimed in my earlier paper that Christian theologians were more concerned qua theologians with this issue than were Christian philosophers qua Christian philosophers.)

13. Note, however, that Kaufman does not say that it is the conviction that one has conclusive evidences or arguments about God which is the sin; he says it is the attempt to control God through conclusive evidences or arguments. It is not clear whether he thinks that the conviction that one has conclusive evidences or arguments inevitably leads to the attempt to control God.

14. In this discussion I prefer the term "salvation" because the term "God-relationship" presupposes the correctness of some sort of theism. If theists are correct, salvation does involve a God-relationship. But a conclusion on this matter need not be built into our terminology.

15. Conceptions of salvation differ in the stress they put on the experiential component compared to the nonexperiential component. Orthodox Protestant conceptions typically place primary emphasis on the nonexperiential component: salvation is a transaction

between God and the sinner; whether we *feel* saved or not is secondary. Other conceptions (including mine and, I suspect, Kaufman's) place more emphasis on the experiential component. Thus any similarity in the experiential component of what two people refer to as salvation is more significant for me than (I think) it would be for Hasker in showing that the term is not used equivocally.

16. Kaufman's diffidence may also have a practical motivation: great sins have been committed and great intolerance practiced in the name of God by those who claimed such knowledge. (Admittedly, the connection is psychological, not logical, but it has been common in Christianity.) Such confidence was a background condition for the Inquisition and for burning heretics at the stake. It contributed to the persecution of the Jews. (Liberals have been guilty of great sins, but not of the sin of coercing others to make them accept their ideas about God.) Kaufman may think that an effective way to lessen religiously based persecution is to get people to think that their conceptions of God and Christ are not well-grounded. And he may think that the confidence that one has conclusive evidence and arguments about God will contribute to intolerance toward others and in this way to a sin against God. He may also fear that it will result in one's not being open to new insights about God that would contradict one's present ideas; after all, if one has conclusive arguments, anything contrary to them would have been an error.

17. Of course, that salvation is a matter of degrees is also controversial; it is part of my perspective but not part of everyone else's. Here is another matter which one could investigate, but am I irrational if I choose to investigate other matters rather than it?

18. Indeed, as a Christian philosopher I find myself more interested in many of the issues which concern Stump and Kretzmann than in those which concern Kaufman. Thus, though I defend the rationality of Kaufman's not pursuing Stump and Kretzmann's issues, I do not think the KK view forbids pursuing those issues. Which issues seem worth pursuing depends on many factors.

19. Bill Hasker generously commented on an earlier draft of this paper. I wish to thank him for his comments, which helped this paper focus on the issues between us and avoid some irrelevancies and misunderstandings.